

VZCZCXRO4018
PP RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHMOS
DE RUEHIHL #0033 0601853
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 011853Z MAR 06
FM REO HILLAH
TO RUEHGB/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD PRIORITY 0547
RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0562
INFO RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE
RUEHIHL/REO HILLAH 0609

C O N F I D E N T I A L HILLAH 000033

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 3/1/2016
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KISL](#) [IZ](#)
SUBJECT: SADR OFFERS MAHDI MILITIA TO SISTANI AS SHRINE PROTECTION
FORCE; CALLS FOR BAGHDAD UNITY RALLY

CLASSIFIED BY: Alfred Fonteneau, Regional Coordinator, REO
Hillah, Department of State.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

11. (U) This is a SET Najaf cable.

12. (C) Summary: Moqtada Al-Sadr, meeting with a group of senior ayatollahs in the Najaf home of Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani, offered his Mahdi Militia as a holy shrine protection force. Sadr also volunteered to deploy his militia to protect the senior clerics themselves in the March 1 meeting. Sistani called for Shi'a and Sunnis to work together peacefully to protect the holy shrines. The night before, Sadr's Kufa office began distributing flyers publishing Sadr's call for a rally for Iraqi unity in Baghdad's Ferdous Square on March 11. End summary.

13. (C) According to Sayid Haider Al-Turfi, a Sadrist cleric who spoke to local SET Najaf staff, Sadr and an aide met on March 1 with Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani, Sistani's son Mohammed Ridha, Ayatollah Mohammed Saeed Al-Hakim, Ayatollah Bashir Al-Najafi and Sayid Al-Ghuraifi, the cleric in charge of the Imam Ali Shrine Protection Force. (Note: Sadr's aide may have been Shaykh Abdul Hadi Al-Daragi, a cleric in Sadr's Baghdad Office, but the source was not certain. End note.) The meeting took place in Sistani's Old City, Najaf home.

14. (C) The meeting reportedly began with pleasantries. Sadr offered his condolences to the clerics for the bombing of the Al-Askariyah Shrine in Samarra. Sistani congratulated Sadr on completing the pilgrimage to Mecca. Sadr answered that the purpose of his pilgrimage was to form links between Iraq and other Arab nations and to serve Islam.

15. (C) Sistani stressed that the Shi'a and Sunni must work together to protect Islam's holy places and to work for peace. He also called for the tribes to have a role in this. Sadr responded by offering his Mahdi Militia to protect the holy shrines and the homes of the ayatollahs. Sistani did not respond to this offer, and the conversation reportedly moved on to other topics.

16. (C) Sadr told Sistani that a delegation from the (Sunni) Association of Muslim Scholars had asked to travel to Najaf to meet with the Marja'iyah in order to strengthen the links between both sides and to calm sectarianism. Sadr's aide offered that Sunni and Shi'a politicians and parliamentarians from Baghdad would likely join the delegation. (Note: The National Iraqi News Agency, a Baghdad-based internet newswire, carried a story March 1 quoting a Baghdad Sadrist, Fadhil Al-Sharaa speaking about this visit. Al-Sharaa welcomed the proposal of the Association of Muslim Scholars to visit Najaf and the clerics there in an effort to reduce sectarian strife. End note.)

¶17. (C) The night before the meeting, on February 28, Sadr's Kufa office began distributing flyers publicizing Sadr's call for an Iraqi unity rally on March 11 in Baghdad's Ferdous Square. Sadr's order read:

"Brothers, The Prophet of Allah, Mohammed, deserves all loyalty and sacrifice and Iraq deserves all of the good. I call all of the Iraqi brothers, without segregation, to protest to discard ethnicity, and for Iraq, and for our Prophet and his followers, to rise with our country to freedom, independence, stability and safety. The protest will be on Saturday, March 11, 2006 in Ferdous Square, where the old regime fell, and let your motto be 'Islam, Peace, and Unity,' and raise the Iraqi flag because it is a symbol of this unity."

¶18. (C) Comment: This meeting, if reported accurately, would seem to mark another step in what appear to be recent efforts by Moqtada Al-Sadr to present himself both to Iraqis and the larger Arab world as a bridge-building statesman, rather than a polarizing firebrand. It remains to be seen whether these efforts are sincere. Also uncertain is how much Sadr's calls for unity are calculated to form a united Sunni-Shi'a front pushing for the immediate withdrawal of Coalition Forces in Iraq, a venerable Sadr refrain that has remained even as he offers new calls for peace. End comment.

FONTENEAU